

ATWOOD'S WARNING TO WAYFARERS

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The world will not be destroyed by those who do evil, but by those who watch them without doing anything.

-Albert Einstein

ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood's warning to wayfarers is heard throughout the novels, be it *Oryx and Crake* or *The Year of the Flood*, through the narrator's voice as well as the description of the happenings in the futuristic world she has created. This future world is full of dark shades which sends shivers down the spine of every reader and leaves the readers with a feeling of urgency to stop such things from happening. Although these novels also voice opinions against free sex and sexual abuse of children, ecological disturbance seems to be her main concern. Her heart cries out on seeing environmental degradation through the use of chemicals, progress in name of biotechnology and research in genetic engineering—thanks to the powerful scientists and the greedy corporates. This paper is an attempt to show how through these novels, which are dystopian tales of environmental catastrophe, Atwood raises her voice against this path of ruin that humans are treading towards—a path that would only lead to distress and leave them with a feeling of bitterness and horror.

KEYWORDS: Dystopia, Ecological Disturbance, Genetic Manipulation, Futuristic World, Environmental Catastrophe, Urgency, Warning

INTRODUCTION

Atwood's warning to wayfarers is heard throughout the novels, be it *Oryx and Crake* or *The Year of the Flood*, through the narrator's voice as well as the description of the happenings in the futuristic world she has created. This future world is full of dark shades which sends shivers down the spine of every reader and leaves the readers with a feeling of urgency to stop such things from happening. Although these novels also voice opinions against free sex and sexual abuse of children, ecological disturbance seems to be her main concern. Her heart cries out on seeing environmental degradation through the use of chemicals, progress in biotechnology and research in genetic engineering— thanks to the powerful scientists and the greedy corporates.

She, with her novels which are dystopian tales of environmental catastrophe, raises her voice against this path of ruin humans are treading towards—as that would only lead to disharmony and distress; and it may steer them to a dead-end or to a place where humans would wonder whether all their strife and so-called developmental works have really helped them progress. They would probably find themselves in a situation, from where they would have to restart civilization and existence on earth. To quote Atwood: I'm not describing our world, but we are going in that direction....It's a future whose beginnings are already with us. (<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts>)

The author's voice is a strong and sound warning to the readers of days to come if they do not amend their ways now. However, she leaves the reader with hope that if there is a change in their attitude, humans with their innovative spirit and undying enthusiasm can rebuild their existence on earth. Yet, the readers are left with the question why ruin

everything and start again? Why not change ways for the better, treat all organisms – be it fellow human beings, animals or birds - with dignity and respect and live in harmony with nature and the world round.

SETTING

The two novels, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, show the effects of progress and developments in the field of bio-technology and genetic engineering. Nature – the plants, trees, shrubs, birds, and animals all fall victims to human greed and selfish motives. Even human beings are not spared, especially if they are from poorer countries. Sexual abuse and slaughter are common sights. Thanks to bio-technology and genetic engineering, genetic manipulation of animals happen in plenty and these are fed to people by the greedy profit making maniacs. Together with this is portrayed the way diseases are not only being cured but also introduced and produced for profit. It is a world of money power that is created by the writer in these novels and how all this comes to a sudden end one day owing to man's arrogance and greed. There is total annihilation and the few survivors who are surrounded by genetically- manipulated fierce animals live in constant fear and curse their existence. Through this portrayal of environmental catastrophe - of the world that could be in a few years from now if humans fail to understand the necessity for co-existence with plants, animals and all that is around them - Atwood probably wants to make humans understand the need to mend their ways and transform themselves before Nature takes the toll on them.

The change she echoes is found in the voice of Adam One in *The Year of the Flood*. Adam One shows how the world should be and how human beings should exist in this world. Humans need to understand that God made this earth not for them alone but also for plants and animals; and the earth would not be a place to live in, without the beautiful mountains, the bountiful flowers, the gushing waters, the green plants, the colourful birds and the magnificent animals.

MAN & ANTHROPOCENTRICISM

Man who lived in harmony with nature became a plunderer. Thanks to industrialization, he began to mine and plunder the resources found in the soil. With industrialization came greed and after that there was no looking back. Chemical spilling, use of pesticides, aerial spraying, nuclear annihilation, various types of pollution and now developments in bio technology and genetic engineering - all these acts of humans have affected the land, water, plants and animals beyond measure. Humans had in the past and still continue to feel that they own the earth and everything on this earth-plants, animals, mineral resources and natural beauty. They have exploited the environment so much that they are now poised on the edge of the world and have to do something to save the world or face the fury of the Mother Earth. This change has to come from within every human. Speaking on the occasion 'OF THE CREATION AND OF THE NAMING OF THE ANIMALS', Adam One says: 'How much have we lost, dear Fellow Mammals and Fellow Mortals! How much have we willfully destroyed! How much do we need to restore, within ourselves!' (p13, TYOF).

In the first few lines of *Oryx and Crake*, even before listing the title, Atwood quotes the satirist Jonathan Swift:

I could perhaps like others have astonished you with strange improbable tales; but I rather chose to relate plain matter of fact in the simplest manner and style; because my principal design was to inform you, and not amuse you' (Jonathan Swift).

Just as Jonathan Swift, although he claimed that he was going to 'relate plain matter of fact in the simplest manner and style'; was actually trying to make humans see their foibles and change for the better; Margaret Atwood too makes an

attempt to reach out to the readers and make them understand the mistakes that are happening all around them. It is an attempt to awaken their consciences and warn them of the serious implication of their present deeds to themselves and the future generation.

The beginning of *Oryx and Crake*, jolts the readers when Snowman, the lone human survivor on the island along with the genetically manipulated humans – the Crakers, says- ‘Nobody nowhere knows what time it is’ (P.4, O&C). Then why are we humans running against time in the present? What dreams are we chasing? Is this the better living we are working towards?

Snowman, the only representative of humans in *Oryx and Crake* laments, ‘Maybe that’s the real him, the last Homo sapiens – white illusion of a man, here today, gone tomorrow, so easily shoved over, left to melt in the sun, getting thinner and thinner until he liquifies and trickles away altogether’ (p224, O&C). The words ‘here today, gone tomorrow, so easily shoved over’ shows how humans are just a speck among the living organisms of the world. Then why do humans assume that they are the most important and feel that they are the centre of the universe?

To make people understand the need for a balanced eco-system and ecological ethics, Adam One’s speeches and discourses addressing “We - the People” focus on saving all organisms and the world from the Waterless Flood. The addresses show the readers the reason for all the happenings and problems and the possible ways to rectify their wrongs, in order to save this world from dangers like ecological imbalance. To put it in other words Adam One shows the readers the world as it should exist ‘The Hymns from The God’s Gardeners Oral Hymn Book’, that appear periodically (after every few chapters) are words of wisdom, aimed at awakening the readers’ conscience and stressing the need to respect all matters on this earth and not think that they alone are the masters who own the earth. The focus is on how humans need to take it upon themselves to retain beauty and balance on this earth. They need to take care of their fellow creatures and the natural beauty around them rather than ruin them and belie the hope and trust that God had in humans, when He first made them.

‘Twas once the finest Garden

That ever has been seen.

And in it God’s dear Creatures

Did swim and play;

But then came the greedy Spoilers,

And killed them all away.

[...]And all the shining Water

Is turned to slime and mire,

And all the feathered Birds so bright

Have ceased their joyful choir.....(The Year of the Flood - Beginning)

‘Deep ecologists reject merely technical solutions, because they constitute yet another form of human dominance and advocate a bio-centric world which recognizes non-human world as having value independently of its usefulness to human beings, who have no right to destroy it except to meet vital needs’ (Waugh, 2006:36).

CONTRAST- THE TOOL USE BY ATWOOD

Atwood employs the tool of contrast to show the readers what humans may have to lose if they continue on the road to disaster.

Language & Knowledge

The protagonist in *Oryx and Crake* is left alone and has no one to talk to. He fears that he is losing his command over language and struggles to get the right words. Knowledge used to be the pride of humans. But after apocalypse, which was the result of human misdeeds like free sex, genetic manipulation, global warming etc.– language, let alone knowledge, is not to be seen anywhere. The Crakers vocabulary and vision are limited; thanks to Crake who did not want his Crakers to know more than he felt they needed- showing the superiority in humans to think they have the right to decide for other living organisms. Having no one to converse with, Snowman says, ‘There are a lot of blank spaces in his stub of a brain, where memory used to be ... He finds himself standing with his mouth open, trying to remember the end of the sentence’ (p5, O&C). Language, sign of civilization and pride of human progress, is on the verge of elimination from this earth.

Absence of Humans

In both *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of Flood*, it is absence of the whole mankind that is garishly portrayed to alarm the readers. The survivors of the Waterless Flood are left alone to see Nature reign supreme – thanks to the many actions of humans that have left them belittled and the whole world in a mess.

“Now I am alone,All, all alone. Alone on a wide, wide sea....Revision: seashore. He feels the need to hear a human voice- a fully human voice, like his own... Sometimes he laughs like a hyena or roars like a lion... or he grunts and squeals like a pigoon or howls like a wolvog....Everything is so empty. Water, sand, sky,trees, fragments of past time. Nobody to hear him. (P10-P11, O&C)

The same idea is echoed by Toby too in *The Year of the Flood*. She yearns for human company in a place where the company only she has is that of the ferocious and frightening genetically manipulated animals. To think that this madness has been created by human greed for power and money!!! The author cautions the commoners to be wary and not be fooled by both the scientists and the CorpSeCorps - representing knowledge and power or people in places of decision making. It is these powerful few who decide the future of humanity and who the commoners need to be vigilant of; if they do not want to see the days portrayed in the novels.

Free Sex

Free sex is another issue, which according to Atwood may lead humans to outrageous consequences. The author presents how this passion is exploited by the corporate - the Blyss Pluss Pill Project and the effect of that- The JUVE virus and ultimate devastation of civilization. This nightmarish description, although a figment of imagination, jolts the readers and makes them shudder.

Medicines and Greed

Atwood exposes the readers to hypocrisy and greed in the field of medicine. She cautions humans from falling a prey to corporate pranks. When talking to Jimmy about a department in Helth Wyzer which only creates new diseases,

Crake says, 'The best disease, from a business point of viewwould be those that causes lingering illnesses. Ideally- that is, for maximum profit – the patient should either get well or die just before all of his or her money runs out' (p211 O&C).

This is a satirical comment on the moral degradation of the people of the medical world and the pharmaceutical companies that go hand-in-hand to make profit, forgetting the service they need to extend to people. People need to be wary and watchful of these villains.

Atwood's advice is simple, but not easy; the first and most significant way we can provide the best future for our world is to individually and collectively sacrifice the profitable for the humane today. (<http://www.griseldaonline>)

GENETIC ENGINEERING

The most important one- the thought and voice –about which the readers hear from the first to the last page of the book- is the work in the field of genetic engineering and its aftermath. Author's opinion on genetic manipulation of animals is voiced through Jimmy's mother, who was herself a scientist until she decided to resign from Organ Inc Farm, as she did not want to be an accomplice and partaker to the crime they were committing. The readers hear her frustration at the doings in the Organ Inc Farm and her anxiety when she tries desperately to make her husband understand that what he was doing was immoral and unjust. 'More people with the brains of pigs. Don't we have enough of those already?...It's wrong, the whole organization is wrong, it's a moral cesspool (p56, O&C).....you're interfering with the building blocks of life. It's immoral. It's...sacrilegious...' (p57, O&C).

Similar idea is being voiced by Jimmy at Watson-Crick Institute- when hearing Crake's views about making humans with 'total guilt-free promiscuity' (p166, O&C) like gibbons and other such animals - 'In your plan we'd just be a bunch of hormone robots... There'd be no free choice' (p166, O&C). However, just like his mother he is also mocked at; as such talks and arguments are not accepted and such people have no place in the world of Oyrx and Crake; which has place only for the intelligentsia and people who are self-centered. It is only the 'number persons', as they are called, who are treated with dignity and enjoy all the best of facilities. 'The word persons' like Jimmy, who thinks every time he is exposed to all these that some 'limit was being crossed' but doesn't have the guts to question and stop, is the author's image of the commoner who is weak, who fears being mocked at and is left to suffer the result of others' doings. The reader ends up feeling that Atwood calls to these people to join together and raise voice against all this - to save the world and Mother Nature; even if it be at the cost of being mocked at or threatened. Otherwise all these people will be left lamenting and ruminating a bit too late, like the Snowman in Oryx and Crake.

This is not to say that Atwood is opposed to science and research work in this field for the better living of humans. To quote Atwood: 'Every aspect of human technology has a dark side, even if it be the bow and the arrow' (<http://www.brainyquote.com/>). She only wishes that the world think of all the consequences when tampering with nature – be it birds, animals, fields, crops, the environment all around and of course human beings. Genetic engineering is a research on living organisms and as there are many unknown doors in this field, it may lead to disastrous consequences if it turns out to be irreversible. In Genetic engineering- in the name of working towards better living for humans - it is possible to go off the limit or to tread on dangerous grounds, due to not only over enthusiasm and anthropocentrism; but also commercialism and corporate greed. It is this that Atwood cautions humans of - not only the commoners but also the genetic scientists and the magnets of the corporate world – for they need to remember they too will be doomed with other humans. As Eugene P Odum, the famous American scientist known for his pioneering work on ecosystem ecology and

who is often called “the ecologists’ ecologist”, prophesies: ‘If man does not learn to live mutualistically with nature then like the unadapted parasite he may exploit his host to the point of destroying himself’ (Odum,1995: 233).

Genetic Manipulation of Plants

Through the Hapicappa Protest Atwood portrays how corporates ruin the life of small time land owners, farmers and plantation labourers by growing genetically modified plants.

The wars were over the new Hapicappa bean, developed by a HelthWyzer subsidiary. Until then the individual coffee beans on each bush had ripened at different times and had needed to be handpicked & processed and shipped in small quantities, but the Hapicappa coffee bush was designed so that all of its beans would ripen simultaneously, and coffee could be grown on huge plantations and harvested and reduced both them and their labourers to starvation-level poverty. (pg. 179, O&C)

When a few raise their voices against this, their sound are stifled by the government as it has been bought and silenced by the Corporates. The protesters are dispersed with teargas and shooting. Other voices are silenced with promises and commitments. To quote Rachel Carson’s in *The Silent Spring*: “When the public protests, confronted with some obvious evidence of damaging results, it is fed little tranquilizing pills of half-truth.”(Carson, 1962).

Corporates fail to realize that this cannot continue for long. The ultimate loss to humanity – with unhealthy food -cannot be evaded forever and people, including the corporates, will face the consequences of growing and eating these.

Plants and Their Importance

In *The Year of The Flood*, Atwood portrays how genetically modified plants are not only expensive but many of them do not have natural richness or taste. To show the richness in the Storehouse of Nature, Adam One lists out how God has given people such useful plants and trees like the spruce, birch, purslane, sorrel, nettles, the holy weeds, walnut, acorn etc. - to feed even the poorest of the poor and it is these that humans are cutting and chopping to fulfill their wants. Adam One adds: ‘For who can doubt god put them there, So starved we’ll never be?’(p128, TYOF).

Genetic Manipulation of Animals

Animals who have served humans when they were hunters, food gatherers and later domesticated by humans and loved by them – animals like, lambs, dogs are the target for manipulation. In these books, we notice how hybrids are created using genetic engineering, only to have organs and traits to serve humans – tampered chicken, tampered pigs- named pigoons, a combination of wolf and dogs- wolvogs, a combination of lion and lamb- liobams- to name a few. Result- these very same creatures are a source of fear for humans during the environmental catastrophe created by the waterless flood.

Small Creatures and Their Importance

Atwood exposes how the chemicals that humans use for better yield and for keeping vegetables from being affected by some insects;has resulted in the damage and death of many small creatures that are useful to humans. Hence the author wants humans to think of ways to protect them, rather than harm them; for many of them are very useful. Adam One discloses their usefulness thus:

The Earthworm and Nematodes and Ants, and their endless tilling of the soil, without which it would harden into a cement-like mass, extinguishing all Life. Think of the anti-biotic properties of the Maggots and of the various Moulds and of the honey that our bees make, and also the Spider's web, so useful in the stopping of blood flow from a wound. For every ill, God has provided a remedy in His Great Medicine Cabinet of Nature' (p160, TYOF).

Their importance is also highlighted in a simple Hymn:

They turn the soil and till it,
 They make the plants to thrive;
 The Earth would be a desert,
 If they were not alive.
 The little Carrion Beetles
 They seek unlikely places
 Return our Husks to Elements,
 And tidy up our spaces. (p162, TYOF)

Through Adam One the author also suggests, 'Let us teach our Children tolerance, and loving –kindness, and correct boundaries'(p195); so that they respect all beings and take care of the small creatures and the marine animals.

THE WATERLESS FLOOD AND THE AFTERMATH

The reader sees what Adam One had prophesied earlier: "Nature's full strength is more than we can take" (p327, TYOF). Toby lives in terror with no one but the genetically manipulated animals –due to genetic engineering research having gone haywire. So Adam One or the author herself asks all readers: 'We have taken the World given to us and carelessly destroyed its fabric and its Creatures...that a new Heaven and a new Earth will then appear. But why would God give us another Earth when we have mistreated this one so badly?'(p424, TYOF). Then the answer follows: 'No, my Friends. It is not this Earth that is to be demolished; it is the Human Species. Perhaps God will create another, more compassionate race to take our place' (p424, TYOF). These words are aimed to awaken the conscience of all humans who have been carelessly exploiting all that God has given them.

Thus both the novels are a cry for an ecological ethic and an attempt to influence readers or humans to see value in diversity and move towards responsible and considerate relationship with other organisms - 'we need to push popular sentiment in a biosphere-friendly direction'(p241, TYOF).

LEARN TO CO-EXIST

Atwood's call to people is to learn to share and live in cohabitation.

Ours is a Fall into Greed: Why do we think that everything on Earth belongs to us, while in reality we belong to everything? We have betrayed the trust of the Animals, and defiled our sacred task of stewardship. God's commandment to "replenish the Earth" did not mean we should fill it to overflowing with ourselves, thus wiping out everything else. How many other species have we already annihilated?.... We pray that we may not fall into the error of pride by considering ourselves as exceptional, alone in all Creation in having souls; and that we will

not vainly imagine that we are set above all other Life, and may destroy it at our pleasure, and with impunity. (p53, TYOF)..... Adam One adds: ... animals are not senseless matter, not mere chunks of meat. No; they have living Souls' (p91, TYOF).

TRANSITION PHASE

Nothing ever happens overnight. It happens over time. The reader sees this in both the novels as many events overlap and are described and registered in both of them. It is the complacency of humans that makes them turn a blind eye to all the ill happenings as long they are singularly not affected by them.

During the Happicuppa protest the reaction of Uncle Pete, Crake's step-father, 'The usual uproar...They'll be tired of it, they'll settled down. Everybody wants a cheaper cup of coffee – you can't fight that' (p181, O&C). – is a sarcastic portrayal by Atwood of the people with this careless attitude when they are not directly affected. She attempts to articulate her thought that such indifference and casual attitude may cost humans their very existence. To stop this from happening all need to join hands and support any protest against people who harm the environment as well as tamper with nature. Humans need to remember that Nature is all-encompassing and powerful and humans are only a tiny speck in nature.

Jimmy's mother's ruminations and ramblings to Jimmy on the environment and natural beauty that existed when she was young is a wake-up call to humanity to change ways and save the environment around them. She too is the voice warning humanity of the consequences of human deeds on Nature.

There were the things his mother rambled on about somewhere, about how everything was being ruined and would never be the same again, like the beach houses her family had owned when she was little, the one that got washed away with the rest of the beaches and quite a few of the eastern coastal cities when the sea-level rose so quickly, and then there was that huge tidal wave, from the Canary Islands volcanoAnd she used to snivel about her grandfather's Florida grapefruit orchard that had dried up like a giant raisin when the rains had stopped coming, the same year Lake Okeechobee had shrunk to a reeking mud puddle and the Everglades had burned for three weeks straight.(p63,O&C)

The readers are made conscious that environmental degradation was already happening and global warming had set in, 'the coastal aquifers turned salty and the northern permafrost melted and the vast tundra bubbled with methane, and the drought in the mid continental plains went on and on, and the Asian steppes turned to sand dunes' (p24, O&C).

It is ironical that this warning comes even from Crake, the main person behind the catastrophe: 'As a species we are in deep trouble.... We're running out of space-time. Demand for resources has exceeded supply for decades in marginal geo-political areas, hence the famines and droughts; but very soon, demand is going to exceed supply for everyone' (p295, O&C)

Let's suppose for the sake of argument,.... That civilization as we know it gets destroyed.... Because all the available surface metals have already been mined.... Without which, no iron age, no bronze age, no age of steel, and all the rest of it. There's metal farther down, but the advanced technology we need for extracting those would have been obliterated. (p223, O&C)

Ironically, this is what is shown in the book.

The pity was 'It (human society) never learned, it made the same cretinous mistakes over and over, trading short-term gain for long-term pain. It was like a giant slug eating it away relentlessly through all other bioforms on the planet, grinding up life on earth...' (p243,O&C).

This clearly sums up Atwood's anger with humans and conveys what she wants humans to do - examine the choices they make, stop harming environment and learn to let live and live.

CONCLUSIONS

What Jimmy, as Snowman, ruminates, is what the author warns the readers of: 'Strange to think of the endless labour, the digging, the hammering, the carrying, the lifting, the drilling, day by day, year by year, century by century; and now the endless crumbling that must be going on everywhere. Sandcastles in the wind' (P 45, O&C) - the words picture how all the efforts of humans have crumbled and vanished in no time due to greed.

Atwood's call for ecological ethics is loud and clear. It is better to correct and modify before it is too late so that all humans are not left ruminating and regretting like Jimmy in *Oryx and Crake* or Toby, Ren and the other survivors in *The Year of the Flood*. The novels echo the idea that humans, with such pride in their knowledge, need to be aware of the great danger that lay in store for them if they do not mend their ways. They need to be responsible and take steps, before it is too late. They should learn to live with other living organisms and nature rather than try to control and dominate them. They should stop treating nature as dead and lifeless and begin to appreciate her role as a living organism. They need to learn to appreciate the immense generosity of nature and respect her sacrifices; for if provoked further this "Mother" may become a "Monster" – who can wipe out man's existence from this "great, wide, beautiful, wonderful world"; as is symbolized by the image of the Dove in *The Year of Flood*, 'though harmless to us.....is not always peaceful: it has a ferocious side to it as well' (p233, TYOF).

This is not to voice an opinion against progress in the field of biotechnology or genetic engineering, it is only a voice of concern and warning to make humans realize that they are a part of nature and 'contrary to techno-capitalist propaganda, it is counterintuitive and suicidal to manipulate, control and attempt to transcend nature'(www.docstoc.com). In an interview, Margaret Atwood quoted Thomas Jefferson: 'the price of freedom is eternal vigilance'. When asked about her novels and views, she continued: 'This is not mad scientist stuff. It's not Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Science is a tool, like a hammer. You can use it for good or ill, to build a house or to murder your neighbour. Some of the biotechnology in the book is quite handy. It's not science you have to look at but the human beings that use it'. (<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts>)

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